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Health and prosperity

Mutual aid in 20th-century America



Five largest U.S. cities and their first Mennonite congregations

1. New York – 1949
2. Los Angeles – 1918
3. Chicago – 1866
4. Houston – 1967
5. Phoenix – 1946

Book's historical accuracy questioned

Since it was first published in 1940, John W. Yoder's *Rosanna of the Amish* has been an undeniable commercial success, with more than 400,000 copies sold. But its veracity has been questioned, despite claims by the author, his relatives, reviewers, and even the publisher that it was entirely accurate and truthful.

The book is the story of Rosanna McGonegal, Yoder's mother and the child of Irish immigrants, who was raised in a Pennsylvania Amish community after her mother died. Yoder's intent was to counter unflattering portrayals of the Amish. Nevertheless, historical suspicions remained, and *Pennsylvania Mennonite Heritage* recently cited a number of instances where Yoder "deliberately or inadvertently strayed considerably from the facts."

Among the incidents found by author S. Duane Kauffman were serious discrepancies in the identity of Rosanna's Irish relatives and of the book's Amish characters, inaccuracies about transportation at the time, even how Rosanna's father died. The result,

Kauffman wrote, is that *Rosanna of the Amish* is not history but fiction.

Yoder biographer Julia Spicher Kasdorf agreed. The book was "based on fact" only "in a figurative sense," she wrote in the introduction of new edition of *Rosanna of the Amish*, published by Herald Press, which has labeled the new version as "the restored text."

BIC political participation traced

The recent election season gave the Brethren in Christ magazine *In Part* opportunity to examine the denomination's changing attitudes towards political participation. Into the 20th century the BIC repeatedly counseled against voting and seeking office. In 1924, the church even suspended member Archibald Carmichael when he was elected to the Canadian Parliament.

Of course, there were exceptions. The church in 1882 declared that school board elections were not political and thus acceptable. In 1913, members were urged to provide clear testimony on temperance, tobacco, and other moral issues.

After World War II, many BIC members voted for war hero and presidential candidate Dwight D. Eisenhower, who had BIC background. In 1959 the church proclaimed voting "a matter of individual conscience." By 2006, 87 percent of church members say they should try to influence the government on issues such as war and poverty.

Soviet combine inventors had tragic end

The first Soviet combine was developed in 1929 by Mennonites Peter Dyck, Gerhard Hamm, and Kornelius Pauls. The men, working for a collectivized implement factory in Zaporozhye that once had been a private Mennonite-owned plant, were initially lauded by the Soviet government.

But such honor was short-lived as Mennonites became suspect. Dyck and Hamm, having been awarded the Order of Lenin, were forced to return their medals and were declared enemies of the people before they were executed, according to *The Marketplace*.

Historical Committee announces essay contest winners



Sarah Bergen

Mutual aid emerged as a theme of the winning entries in this year's John Horsch Mennonite Historical Essay Contest, sponsored by the Mennonite Church USA Historical Committee.

Sarah Bergen from Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, Fresno, Calif., took top honors in the graduate school/seminary category with her paper on "Re-Interpreting Mennonite Identity in Mid-20th Century America: A Conversation about Mutual Aid."

MMA's work was also a subject of the first-place paper in the undergraduate category, "Sending Mixed Messages to Congress: Mennonite Involvement in Proposed National Health Care Reform 1992-1994" by Jonny Gerig Meyer from Goshen College.

Bergen's and Meyer's papers are excerpted in this issue of *Mennonite Historical Bulletin*.

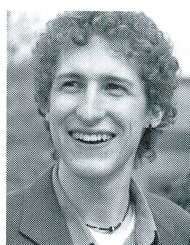
Devon Miller of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Ind., won second in the graduate school/seminary category with "The Gospel for All Creatures: An Anabaptist Theology for Reconciliation."

In the undergraduate category, Peter Miller of Bethel College, North Newton, Kan., and Andre Shenk of Goshen College tied for second place. Miller explored "Souls, Cars and Division: The Amish Mission Movement of the 1950s and Its Effects on the Amish Community of Partridge, Kan." Shenk wrote "A Crisis Among Mennonites: Competing Traditions in the Mennonite Church in the Early 1980s."

All award-winners receive cash prizes, while the first-place finishers also get one-year subscriptions to *Mennonite Quarterly Review*.

Judges for this year's contest were Lee Roy Berry, a lawyer and political science instructor at Goshen College; David Rempel-Smucker, a historian and writer from Lancaster, Pa.; and Rachel Waltner Goossen, a history professor at Washburn University, Topeka, Kan.

The contest is open to students at the graduate school/seminary, undergraduate and seminary levels. This year's drew 12 entries. There were no submissions in the high school category.



Jonny Gerig Meyer

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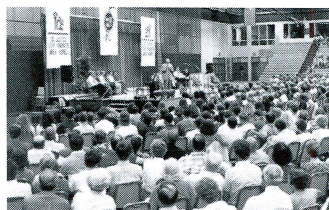


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by Rich Preheim



Cover: Nurses pose for a photo outside the Bethel Deaconess Hospital in Mountain Lake, Minn., 1928. The hospital was just one expression of Mennonite mutual aid in the community. Mennonite Church USA Archives-North Newton

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Identity and institutions

Changing times meant changing notions of mutual aid

by Sarah Bergen

In the 1930s and 1940s a number of Mennonite scholars were involved in discussions about the theological convictions of Mennonitism that made it distinct from other denominations in North America. Those scholars included J. Winfield Fretz, Guy F. Hershberger, and Harold S. Bender. Their passion was at least somewhat motivated by the perceived threat to Mennonite identity that urbanization posed. Urbanization and secularization seemed to go hand-in-hand, and as Paul Toews has noted, when that happened, identity markers started to change: there was an increased shift from sociological to ideological markers.¹ For Mennonites that translated to being less able to claim an agricultural, small-village brotherhood. That is why the issue of mutual aid came to the forefront of Mennonite discussions.

According to the 1936 Census of Religious Bodies conducted by the U.S. government, 87 percent of Mennonites were still classified as rural.² But that was destined to change rapidly and consistently. Mechanization, industrialization, a growing tenant class, and increased unemployment all contributed to the decline of rural Mennonites.³ Many considered this a serious problem. “But if the city environment provides more numerous contacts, these contacts are also of a poorer quality than those of the country,” Hershberger wrote. “The reason is that social relations in a rural environment are intimate and personal; they are of the primary type, while social relations in a city environment are to a large extent impersonal and secondary.”⁴ He called for the Mennonite churches to step up and participate in what he saw as a growing problem, particularly the large numbers of Mennonites who would soon begin to draw government pensions. “The Mennonite way of life would be greatly enhanced if the church would, in an organized way, do something so it will not be necessary for individuals to take advantage of government help,” Hershberger said. “It would seem much better for Mennonite farmers to work together closely with each other than to work so closely with the government.”⁵ Melvin Gingerich issued a call to action founded on the belief that an “economic slave,” or wage earner, had no incentive to save. But if that person had a garden, a house, a small farm, he is transformed.⁶ Gingerich urged Mennonites to set up young people as farmers and explore “a more cooperative community life” where “we will learn to depend less upon *things* for our pleasure.”⁷

But probably the most influential voice in the North American Mennonite mutual

Participants in the third annual Conference of Mennonite Societies for Mutual Aid, 1957 – Front row: Samuel Wenger, Harold Swartzendruber, Howard Raid. Back row: William Snyder, Jakob Wedel, J. Winfield Fretz, Harold Schmidt.

Mennonite Church USA Archives-North
Newton

aid practice discussion was Fretz, who did valuable work as a student at the University of Chicago in the 1930s and '40s. He received three degrees from Chicago, and his three dissertations each addressed mutual aid: "Christian Mutual Aid Societies Among the Mennonites" (1938, master of arts degree), "A Study of Religious Institutions in Chicago" (1940, bachelor of divinity), and "Mennonite Mutual Aid: A Contribution Toward the Establishment of a Christian Community" (1941, doctorate). He had "fallen in love" with Rochdale principles of cooperation and the cooperative movement, especially as an alternative to the "selfish aspects of capitalism."⁸ The University of Chicago, known for its affinity for sociological study, was the perfect place to test his ideas. In 1938, Fretz claimed that urbanization and secularization go hand in hand:

Rapid urbanization with its manifold attraction and distraction has all but destroyed the spirit of the neighborhood and communal solidarity. . . . As alien elements have become assimilated they have felt less keenly the need of fraternization and mutual aid. The force of the religious motive has also been weakened.⁹

Two years later, in 1940, Fretz completed a study of Mennonite mission churches in Chicago. These were primarily started by rural congregations in order to provide a religious community for their brothers and sisters as they moved to the city to find work. Fretz identified three categories of Mennonites: Traditional, Progressive, and Evangelical. The Traditional Mennonite, as identified by Fretz, is a city-dweller who maintains much of the folkways of rural Mennonite life. The Progressive Mennonite promotes distinctive Mennonite teaching but is identified with more liberal branches of the Mennonite church.¹⁰ The Evangelistic Mennonite "can best be characterized by identifying its religious outlook and missionary technique with that of the Moody Bible Institute."¹¹ Fretz's point in his dissertation was that although urban

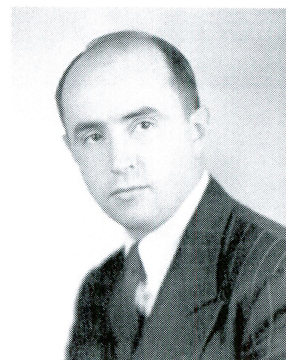
Mennonite churches in Chicago might save souls, they did not accomplish it in any way that is markedly Mennonite. So he urged Mennonites to return to the rural, agrarian lives they had historically lived.

Fretz completed his doctoral dissertation a year later. He synthesized the information from his previous two writing and research projects and applied his sociological knowledge directly and specifically to mutual aid practices. He defined mutual aid as "love expressed relative to need" and cited research on animals.

Beginning with such lowly and despised creatures as rats, it has been observed that, even though often heard fighting in our alleys and cellars, they are sufficiently clever not to quarrel when they plunder the larder. They aid one another in raiding expeditions and migrations and even look out for the welfare of their own invalids.¹²

If even rats do it, then ought not Mennonites practice mutual aid? Fretz does draw the distinction between humans and animals by noting that humans have language, self-consciousness, judgment, and mutual regard, which set them apart, that "human behavior tends to be purposive. It exercises foresight, anticipation, planning, reflection, and idealization."¹³ So, while animals may instinctively cooperate in order to survive, humans are set apart by their ability to engage in cooperative acts deliberately, as a way of embodying their beliefs. Here is where Fretz affirms the Mennonite practice of mutual aid as it is based in Mennonite biblical and theological convictions.

In 1940, Fretz took what he had discovered so far and issued an ethical exhortation to Mennonites in his article "Mennonites and Their Economic Problems" in *Mennonite Quarterly Review*.¹⁴ His idea was to plant a community of Mennonites who could colonize an area and live in mutuality. He referenced the Russian Mennonites' practice of giving young people a home and land to begin farming as an example of what he hoped Mennonites could and would do for their youth in



J. Winfield Fretz, 1945

Mennonite Church USA Archives-North
Newton

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North America.¹⁵ Others joined Fretz in issuing calls, admonitions, and exhortations to North American Mennonites to take an affirmative stand in support of mutual aid. In the mid-20th century North American context that meant institutionalization.

That was already happening at the local level. In Minnesota, nationally known as a progressive state, there were more co-operatives than in any other state. In his master's thesis, Fretz focused on Mountain Lake, an isolated Mennonite community that had become nearly self-sufficient because of its mutual aid practices, touching nearly every aspect of community life.¹⁶ By World War II, area Mennonites had developed the following: Mennonite Aid Plan, a preparatory school, Bethel Deaconess Hospital, Old Folks Home, Farmers Co-operative Elevator Co., Farmers Co-operative Creamery Association, Shipping Association, Co-operative Oil Association, and Co-operative Cold Storage Association.

In addition, Bethel College in North Newton, Kan., was an example Fretz used of the institutionalization of mutual aid. The college had decided to purchase land and allow students to run a farm from which nearly all of their food was harvested. The college also began many in-house services—for example, its own printing press, infirmary, laundry, messenger service, and bus routes.¹⁷ In 1941, the college still had plans to begin other in-house services, such as a beauty parlor.

In addition to their continued concern about the effects of urbanization on their communities, by 1944 Mennonites were urgently searching for ways to take care of the men coming back from CPS. A Board of Mutual Aid was discussed, which would be concerned with loans, counseling, and job information—"a sort of Mennonite version of the nation's G.I. Bill for veterans."¹⁸ Mennonite Mutual Aid was formed in May 1945. In July it was incorporated as a not-for-profit organization in Indiana, and office space was found in Goshen and employees

hired.¹⁹ This move showed Mennonites taking corporate responsibility for their mutual aid practices on a larger scale than ever before.

Bergen is a student at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, Fresno, Calif.

Endnotes

- 1 Paul Toews, personal conversation, 30 Apr. 2008.
- 2 J. W. Fretz, "Mennonites and Their Economic Problems," *Mennonite Quarterly Review (MQR)* 14:4 (1940): 196.
- 3 Fretz, "Mennonites," *MQR*, 196.
- 4 Guy F. Hershberger, "Maintaining the Mennonite Rural Community," *MQR* 14:4 (1940): 219.
- 5 Hershberger, "Maintaining," *MQR*, 223.
- 6 Melvin Gingerich, "Rural Life Problems and the Mennonites," *MQR*, 16:3 (1942):170. Gingerich is drawing from L.G. Ligutti and J.C. Rawe, *Rural Roads to Security*, Bruce Pub. Co., 1940.
- 7 Gingerich, "Rural Life Problems," *MQR*, 171-172.
- 8 Donald Kraybill and Willard M. Swartley, eds., *Building Communities of Compassion: Mennonite Mutual Aid in Theory and Practice* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1998), 183. This chapter, "Changing Patterns of Mutual Aid in Ontario," was written by E. Reginald Good.
- 9 Fretz, "Christian Mutual Aid Societies Among the Mennonites" (M.A. thesis, University of Chicago, 1938), 18.
- 10 Fretz, "Christian Mutual Aid Societies," 131.
- 11 Fretz, "Christian Mutual Aid Societies," 133. Fretz goes on to say that the Evangelistic Mennonite "subscribes to a minimum of five or six doctrines which have been set up as essential, fundamental, and infallible." He is identifying the emergence of fundamentalism among Mennonites, at least in Chicago.
- 12 Fretz, "Mennonite Mutual Aid: A Contribution Toward the Establishment of a Christian Community" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1941), 13. He cites Petr Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, 1902 edition.
- 13 Fretz, "Mennonite Mutual Aid" Ph.D. diss., 34.
- 14 Fretz, "Mennonites," *MQR*.
- 15 Fretz, "Mennonites," *MQR*, 213.
- 16 Fretz treats mutual aid in Mountain Lake, Minn., thoroughly in his M.A. thesis as well as in the article "Mutual Aid Among Mennonites: Part II," *MQR* 13:3 (1939).
- 17 Fretz, "Mennonite Mutual Aid" Ph.D. diss., 159-160.
- 18 Paul Toews, *Mennonites in American Society, 1930-1970: Modernity and the Persistence of Religious Community* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1996), 195.
- 19 H.L. Swarzendruber, "MMA: The First 30 Years," in *The Mennonite Mutual Aid Retreat*, 1-3; J.W. Fretz, *Christian Mutual Aid: A Handbook of Brotherhood Economics*, (Akron: MCC, 1947), 66.



Two Bethel College students feed cattle on the college farm, circa 1951.

Mennonite Church USA Archive-North Newton



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Mixed messages

During the 1990s' push for healthcare reform, Mennonite voices were plentiful but saying different things.

by Jonny Gerig Meyer

Far from passively observing the national exploration of healthcare reform in the early 1990s, Mennonites actively sought to “seize this historic opportunity” to put forward a distinctly Mennonite position.¹ Mennonite involvement in the healthcare industry included not only Mennonite Mutual Aid (MMA) but also thousands of Mennonite healthcare professionals and numerous Mennonite hospitals, nursing homes, and mental health centers.² But until the national focus on reform in early 1991, these groups had not given a formal response to the healthcare crisis.

In April 1991, the Council of Moderators and Secretaries (CMS)—leaders of the Mennonite Church (MC), General Conference Mennonite Church (GC), Mennonite Brethren (MB), and Brethren in Christ (BIC)—held a consultation in Chicago at the request of Mennonite Health Services (MHS), the organization of Mennonite healthcare institutions. At this meeting, the CMS encouraged Mennonite Health Association (MHA), the umbrella organization for all Mennonite health-related institutions, to “provide leadership for a Mennonite response to the health issues facing us today.”³ Responding to the CMS’s call, MHA president Paul Kraybill organized a conference—

“Dialogue ’92”—to take place on March 6-8 in Indianapolis, with the goal of bringing together Mennonite and BIC pastors, conference leaders, health professionals, healthcare providers, and caregivers.⁴

Dialogue ’92 marked the beginning of an organized movement within Mennonite denominations to formally respond to the healthcare crisis. More than 160 participants attended the meeting—including representatives from both MMA and the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) U.S. Washington Office—and one of the dominant themes presented was the need for mutual accountability between the church and both healthcare and mutual aid institutions.⁵ In April 1992, the Dialogue ’92 steering committee agreed to continue as an ad hoc group. After changing its name to the Health Dialogue Steering Committee (HDSC) in June 1992, the group continued to foster coordination among Mennonite institutions and educate Mennonites about healthcare issues.⁶

After Dialogue ’92, the HDSC was asked to prepare a statement to be considered as a denominational resolution on health care, and delegates to the 1992 GC U.S. Assembly adopted the HDSC’s “A Resolution on Health Care.” It recognized

Delegates at the General Conference Mennonite Church’s 1992 assembly in Sioux Falls, S.D., adopted a resolution calling for a healthcare system accessible to “everyone, everywhere in the United States ... regardless of ability to pay.”

Mennonite Church USA Communication Office

the growing crisis and called for a system that would provide “access to basic health care to everyone, everywhere in the United States ... regardless of ability to pay.”⁷ Other emphases included the need for preventative care, greater acceptance of mortality and the limits of financial resources, and a desire to control costs. One year later, the MC General Assembly adopted a similar resolution, also drafted by the HDSC, which included stronger language directed at Mennonite health-related institutions. Continuing to promote universal access to health care, the MC resolution specifically called for “the personal and institutional sacrifices necessary to provide justice in the health care system,” and asked institutions to “go beyond professional self-interest in responding to the health care crisis.”⁸

Meanwhile, both MMA and the MCC U.S. Washington Office were participants in the Interreligious Health Care Access Campaign (IHCAC), an ad hoc group representing a variety of religious organizations and Protestant denominations.⁹ The HDSC believed Mennonite participation in the IHCAC should be coordinated between MMA and the Washington Office and that the Washington Office should be responsive to the perspectives of other Mennonite groups. Like the HDSC and the GC and MC resolutions, the IHCAC highlighted universal coverage as its primary principle in evaluating legislative initiatives for healthcare reform. In late 1992, Mennonite groups seemed to be on the same page regarding reform, as the HDSC, MMA, and Washington Office all promoted universal coverage and recognized the need for “a new way of thinking about health care.”¹⁰

Before long, however, disagreements over the best legislative proposal and the most appropriate way to publicly engage reform overshadowed any apparent unity. The split became increasingly evident when, in early 1993, the IHCAC formally endorsed the federal American Health Security Act (AHSA)—Sen. Paul Wellstone’s (D-Minn.) proposal for a publicly financed healthcare

system—as the legislation best suited to provide universal and equal access to care, maintain quality benefits for all citizens, and preserve individual choice at limited cost. The Washington Office fully supported IHCAC’s endorsement.

But MMA withdrew from the IHCAC and later that year began working with a private legal consultant to promote a different legislative solution.¹¹ In May 1992, MMA had adopted four “Guiding Principles for Responding to the Health Care Crisis,” which were strikingly similar to those outlined in the later GC and MC resolutions.¹² For example, MMA’s first principle called for a healthcare system able to provide “access to a basic level of care to everyone, everywhere in the United States.”¹³ Throughout 1992 and 1993, MMA continued to emphasize universal coverage, preventative treatment, recognizing human mortality, and the necessity of some level of government involvement in health care.

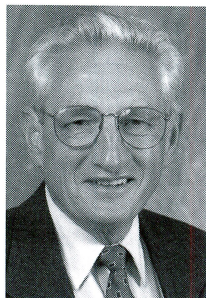
But when the Clinton administration introduced its Health Security Act (HSA) in late 1993, MMA’s strategy shifted dramatically. While both the HSA and previously introduced AHSA contained versions of universal coverage, MMA refused to support the AHSA and quickly voiced two concerns about the HSA. First, the regional Health Care Alliances (HCAs) proposed by Clinton would have the authority to decide which plans to offer in each area; if MMA’s plans were not approved by an HCA, they would not be available to anyone in that area of service. Second, any plan approved by an HCA would be forced to accept anyone who applies. Proponents of universal and equal access to health care viewed this as positive, as it would no longer allow insurance providers to deny coverage to applicants based on preexisting medical conditions. But MMA received tax benefits as a nonprofit fraternal organization serving only Anabaptist-related denominations, and it used the tax benefits to provide grants to constituent congregations and individuals. Under the HSA, MMA would no longer be allowed to be a fraternal organization and

Under the HSA, MMA would essentially be forced to operate like any other insurance provider or pull out of the health-insurance business.

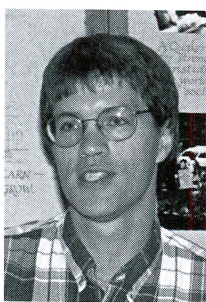
MMA was quick to find congressional support for a special legislative exemption despite the fact that this was its first experience directly lobbying on Capitol Hill.

would essentially be forced to operate like any other insurance provider or pull out of the health-insurance business.

While supporting the principles behind healthcare reform and universal coverage, MMA wanted to be able to continue to serve its constituents as it was. Predicting that the Clinton proposal, HSA, was the legislation most likely to pass Congress, MMA began contacting legislators and advocating for an exemption to allow it to “operate as a closed health plan for members of the Mennonite and related Anabaptist faith community.”¹⁴ MMA wanted to opt out of the HCAs in order to continue to operate as a closed market “not open to members of the general public.”¹⁵ The HSA already contained an exemption allowing employers of more than 5,000 people to establish their own HCA. With 47,000 members (approximately 8 percent of eligible Anabaptists), MMA simply requested a special exemption based on religious faith instead of employer-employee relationship.¹⁶



Howard Brenneman



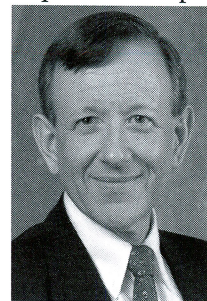
Karl Shelly

In a November 1993 letter to church leaders explaining MMA’s approach, MMA president Howard Brenneman attempted to convey three points: that MMA was supportive of universal coverage; that it had specific concerns with the Clinton plan as well as general concerns about a single-payer plan; and that MMA as an institution wanted to survive healthcare reform.¹⁷ The Washington Office and IHCAC expressed concerns that MMA’s latter two points were inconsistent with its first point.¹⁸ Karl Shelly, who was in charge of the Washington Office’s involvement in healthcare reform, wrote:

It is unclear to me how MMA’s lobbying strategy of creating an exemption for itself in the Clinton plan benefits the millions of people without

adequate health care. If MMA isn’t taking the lead on this crucial aspect of the reform debate, [the Washington Office] should be explicitly providing an alternative message to our constituency.¹⁹

Brenneman maintained that a desire for universal coverage was consistent with MMA’s specific concerns about the HSA. He replied, “We believe universal access can be achieved by means that do not require a complete restructuring of the



Karl Sommers

system such as the single payer approach would require.”²⁰ Recognizing MMA’s differences with the Washington Office, Brenneman asked Karl Sommers, MMA vice president of corporate planning, to begin regular discussions with Shelly and the Washington Office.²¹

The need for communication became more apparent the following February, when staff from the Washington Office and IHCAC went to the office of Rep. James Greenwood (R-Pa.) to encourage him to support the AHSA or to strengthen universal coverage in the HSA. When the representative’s aide informed them that neither Greenwood nor Mennonites were interested in universal coverage, Shelly’s fears were confirmed that the mixed messages from Mennonite institutions were causing confusion on Capitol Hill. Not only was Greenwood uninformed about the diversity of Mennonite views, but he was also apparently unaware of MMA’s official support for universal coverage.²²

As a large organization with numerous resources and political connections, MMA was quick to find congressional support for a special legislative exemption despite the fact that this was its first experience directly lobbying on Capitol Hill.²³ Spending more on healthcare lobbying than the Washington Office’s entire annual budget, MMA encouraged key legislators from Mennonite areas to support an amendment to the

HSA that would allow MMA to operate as a religiously based HCA.²⁴ With lobbyist help, MMA staff members testified before Congress several times.²⁵ As Greenwood's statements suggest, MMA's desire for an exemption obscured its secondary goal of universal coverage.²⁶ While MMA maintained that its desire for an exemption went hand-in-hand with a desire for universal coverage, it remained hesitant to vocally support universal coverage on Capitol Hill or to even encourage constituents to advocate for it out of fear that the message might negatively affect MMA's amendment strategy.²⁷

Sommers emphasized that MMA supported healthcare reform and the HSA, but the organization did not want to be excluded from serving only Anabaptist-related denominations. "We were quite willing to be subject to the rules of the plan, except that we had to accept everyone," he said. "As a fraternal organization, we wanted to be able to participate. Our only concern was being able to exclude people."²⁸ In Clinton's proposal, HCAs were crucial in providing universal access. With the creation of large risk pools—including the young and old, healthy and sick—HCAs would be able to adequately spread risk and maintain the resources to provide coverage for all. By seeking to be exempt from participation in HCAs, MMA was in effect refusing to take part in helping provide universal coverage. Shelly argued that if MMA withdrew and formed a smaller risk pool exclusively of Mennonites—who were statistically healthier and less likely to have high healthcare costs—those left behind would be less able to care for each other.²⁹

While there were many differences between MMA and the Washington Office, the primary causes of their disagreements stemmed from two interconnected organizational differences. First, the two organizations acted out of different models. By responding only to the HSA—the plan judged by MMA to be most likely to pass Congress—MMA took a pragmatic approach that allowed the institution to

continue operating. MMA had a vested interest in institutional self-preservation, based on an understanding of the desires of its members. In a letter to MCC U.S. executive secretary Lynette Meck, Brenneman wrote:

We believe Mennonites expect MMA to reflect the values relating to stewardship and mutual aid in the delivery of health care. We know the church expects us to do all we can to see that our unique values are expressed. Were it not for our strong beliefs about stewardship and mutual aid issues, we may not feel as strongly about the need to survive in health care long term.³⁰

Perceiving a clear mandate to stay in business from its members and the church, MMA openly recognized its desire to continue operating as an insurance agency.³¹ Universal access to health care became secondary to concerns about the future of the organization and its continuing ability to serve its constituents. MMA refused to join most other insurance organizations—despite being a member of the Health Insurance Association of America—in attacking the HSA, but by withdrawing from HCAs and refusing to support non-Mennonites, MMA's pursuit of a legislative exemption weakened aspects of universal coverage in the HSA. Additionally, like most insurance companies, the leaders of MMA were skeptical of the ability of the government to efficiently manage a single-payer healthcare system.³²

The Washington Office operated out of a prophetic framework that led it to "plug into the legislative process at a point that is ahead of what is likely to emerge as final legislation in hopes of pulling the outcome toward universal access."³³ By supporting the plan that best represented its goal, the Washington Office pushed both the church and MMA to consider the needs of those outside the church above the interests of Mennonite constituents. The Washington Office recognized that the AHSA was not likely to pass Congress, but saw this as an opportunity to push legislators to include

The Washington Office recognized an opportunity to push legislators to include universal coverage in any new proposal for healthcare reform.

universal coverage in any new proposal for healthcare reform.

Second, MMA and the Washington Office had different understandings of their roles on Capitol Hill and sought to represent the conflicting interests of different groups of people. Having been given a mandate from its constituents to lead “Mennonites and related groups toward greater practice of the biblical principles of stewardship and mutual aid,” MMA sought primarily to “serve and support those who are already part of the church.”³⁴ While promoting universal coverage, MMA understood its mission to provide insurance coverage for Anabaptists, not for uninsured people outside the church community. “It is the role of the church to reach out to the poor and oppressed,” Sommers said. “It is the role of MMA to support church members in this activity with various mutual aid programs.”³⁵ By responding to the needs and concerns of its constituents, MMA strove to fulfill its mission of providing mutual aid and stewardship for the church.

The Washington Office, meanwhile, had a distinctly outward-focused mission to “stand with the poor through advocacy on Capitol Hill.”³⁶ While acting out of the MC and GC resolutions on health care and representing what it understood to be “the best of Mennonite theology,” the Washington Office did not claim to support healthcare reform that would best serve the self-interest of Mennonites.³⁷ In fact, it recognized an apparent tension between Mennonite middle- and upper-class interests and its role of advocacy for the poor. Shelly wrote:

The key question should be “does our self-interest work against the interests of the poor?” If so, we need to be willing to

sacrifice our self-interest or find ways in which our self-interest does not adversely affect those already hurting. Health care reform has proved to be an issue where the self-interest of many Mennonites is competing with the interests of those most in need.³⁸

Because they represented different interests, MMA and the Washington Office brought different messages to Capitol Hill. After a meeting between board members of MMA and MCC U.S. in July 1994, Meck summarized:

MMA analyzes healthcare reform from the perspective of a health insurance and mutual aid agency that was established to carry out a Mennonite tradition of mutual care within the church. MCC U.S.’ mission is to address human need in the United States. It analyzes healthcare from the perspective of what best serves the needs of the “poorest of the poor” in the United States.³⁹

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Endnotes

- 1 Health Dialogue Steering Committee, letter from various Mennonite institutions to legislators on Capitol Hill, 15 June 1994, as found in file entitled “HC and Mennos, 1990s,” in the personal files of Karl Shelly, Goshen, Ind.
- 2 Scot D. Yoder, “What Is the Church Doing About the U.S. Health Care Crisis?” *Gospel Herald*, 20 Oct. 1992, 7.
- 3 Carl L. Good, “Dialogue ’92 Steering Committee Meeting Minutes,” 22 Apr. 1992, 1, as found in file entitled “HDSC Minutes, 1992-94,” in the personal files of Willard S. Krabill, Goshen, Ind.
- 4 Paul Kraybill, “Dialogue ’92 Summary Task Force Report (Cover Letter),” 26 Mar. 1992,

as found in file titled “Steering Committee, HDSC,” in the personal files of Willard S. Krabill, Goshen, Ind.

- 5 Myron Ebersole et al., “Dialogue ’92 Summary Task Force Report,” 6-8 Mar. 1992, 2, as found in file titled “Steering Committee, HDSC,” in the personal files of Willard S. Krabill, Goshen, Ind.
- 6 In June 1992, the HDSC was composed of James Waltner (chair), pastoral representative; Lawrence Greaser, MHA; Paul Kraybill, MHA; Gene Yoder, MHA board member and president of Greencroft (a Mennonite retirement community); Anne Hershberger and Virginia Christophel, both Mennonite Nurses Association; Vyrion Schmidt, MMA; Carl Good, MHS; James Lapp, CMS; and Willard S. Krabill, Mennonite Medical Association. Christophel ceased to participate after February 1993. Dean Preheim-Bartel joined as the new executive director of MHA, replacing Paul Kraybill, in November 1992, and Scot D. Yoder regularly participated as a staff assistant assigned by MMA.
- 7 “A Resolution on Health Care,” adopted at the U.S. Assembly of the General Conference Mennonite Church, Sioux Falls, S.D., 22 July 1992. Available in the Mennonite Church USA Archives, North Newton, Kans.
- 8 “Resolution on Health Care in the United States,” adopted at the Twelfth Mennonite Church General Assembly, Philadelphia, 30 July 1993. See *Proceedings: Twelfth Mennonite Church General Assembly*, 36-37; and *Workbook: Mennonite Church Convention and General Assembly*, 91-92, available in the Mennonite Church USA Archives, Goshen, Ind. The resolution also questioned the ethics of MMA policies, and asked “the church and Mennonite Mutual Aid to reconsider the justice of commercial underwriting practices and find alternatives which embody the biblical ideals of justice and mutual aid.”
- 9 See, e.g., Good, “Dialogue ’92 Steering Committee Meeting Minutes,” 22 Apr. 1992, 4; and Eldon Stoltzfus, “Report on the Annual Meeting of the Interreligious Health Care Access Campaign: Houston, Texas,” 28-30 June 1992, as found in file titled “Mennonite HCR Responses,” in the personal files of Willard S. Krabill, Goshen, Ind.
- 10 Mennonite Mutual Aid, “Guiding Principles for Responding to the Health Care Crisis,” May 1992, 2, as found in file titled “HC and Mennos, 1990s,” in the personal files of Karl Shelly, Goshen, Ind.
- 11 For more on MMA’s withdrawal from the IHCAC, see Ruth Harder, “Mennonite Mutual Aid: Ethics of Stewardship,” May 2003, 4, as found in file titled “HC and

- Mennos, 1990s,” in the personal files of Karl Shelly, Goshen, Ind.; and Karl Shelly, “Health Care Reform: MMA & MCC U.S.,” as found in file titled “HC and Mennos, 1990s,” in the personal files of Karl Shelly, Goshen, Ind. In a letter to Howard Brenneman on 8 Dec. 1993, Jeffrey Roth Martin of IHCAC stated that MMA was still an IHCAC member. Other sources, however, implied that MMA had never been an official member but had simply participated in the ad hoc group throughout 1991 and 1992. Regardless of its official membership status, MMA ceased participation in the IHCAC as a result of the group’s endorsement of the AHSA. See Jeffrey Roth Martin, letter to Howard Brenneman, 8 Dec. 1993, as found in file titled “HC and Mennos, 1990s,” in the personal files of Karl Shelly, Goshen, Ind.
- 12 Mennonite Mutual Aid, “Guiding Principles.” The similarities between this document and the forthcoming HDSC resolutions were not coincidental; Vyrion Schmidt from MMA wrote the first draft of what would later become the GC resolution of 1992.
 - 13 Ibid.
 - 14 Mennonite Mutual Aid, “Statement by Mennonite Mutual Aid on Health Care Reform,” 4 Feb. 1994, 2, as found in file titled “HC and Mennos, 1990s,” in the personal files of Karl Shelly, Goshen, Ind.
 - 15 Mennonite Mutual Aid, “Statement,” 2.
 - 16 Mennonite Mutual Aid, “Health Care Reform: What You Need to Know,” Nov. 1993, 3, as found in file titled “HDSC Minutes, 1992-94,” in the personal files of Willard S. Krabill, Goshen, Ind. MMA claimed a membership of 47,000 out of approximately 600,000 people belonging to Mennonite and related Anabaptist churches. See also Mennonite Mutual Aid, “Statement,” 4 Feb. 1994.
 - 17 Mennonite Mutual Aid, “Health Care Reform.” Summarized in Karl Shelly, letter to Harold Nussbaum, 7 Dec. 1993, “MMA Letter Re: Health Care Reform,” as found in file titled “HC and Mennos, 1990s,” in the personal files of Karl Shelly, Goshen, Ind.
 - 18 See, e.g., Shelly, “MMA Letter Re: Health Care Reform”; and Martin, letter to Howard Brenneman, 8 Dec. 1993.
 - 19 Shelly, “MMA Letter Re: Health Care Reform.”
 - 20 Howard Brenneman, MMA president, to Lynette Meck, MCC U.S. executive secretary, 6 January 1994, in the personal files of Karl Sommers, Goshen, Ind.
 - 21 Ibid.
 - 22 This event is most clearly outlined in Karl Shelly’s letters to Lynette Meck and Harold Nussbaum, as well as Meck’s personal notes from a phone conversation with Karl Sommers. See Lynette Meck, “Notes from My Phone Conversation with Karl Sommers,” 4 Mar. 1994, as found in file entitled “HC and Mennos, 1990s,” in the personal files of Karl Shelly, Goshen, Ind.; Shelly, “MMA & Health Care Reform”; Shelly, “Health Care Reform & MMA”; and Karl Shelly, letter to Lynette Meck, 24 May 1994, “MMA’s Exemption Strategy,” 4-5, as found in file titled “HC and Mennos, 1990s,” in the personal files of Karl Shelly, Goshen, Ind. For a slightly different version, see the notes of Karl Sommers, “The MCC Problem.” The event was also conveyed in interviews with both Shelly (11 Feb. 2008) and Sommers (29 Feb. 2008). For summaries of this story, which was also widely retold in Mennonite news articles, see Harder, “Mennonite Mutual Aid,” and Shelly, “Health Care Reform: MMA & MCC U.S.”
 - 23 Sommers, interview by author, 29 Feb. 2008.
 - 24 Keith Graber Miller, *Wise as Serpents, Innocent as Doves: American Mennonites Engage Washington*, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1996), 114. According to Miller, the annual budget of the Washington Office was approximately \$175,000. See Graber Miller, *Wise as Serpents*, 233n.
 - 25 Mennonite Mutual Aid, “Health Care Reform,” 3.
 - 26 In a meeting with the Washington Office, representatives from MMA stated that “MMA informs the congressional offices [we] visit that MMA is for universal access” and continued to assert that its desire to be included in the HSA implicitly expressed support for universal coverage. See Karl Shelly, “MCC U.S./MMA Meeting in Indianapolis, Ind.,” 22 Mar. 1994, as found in file titled “HC and Mennos, 1990s” in the personal files of Karl Shelly, Goshen, Ind.
 - 27 See Karl Shelly, “Mennonite Health Association Assembly: Columbus, Ohio, 7-10 Apr. 1994,” 3, as found in file titled “HC and Mennos, 1990s,” in the personal files of Karl Shelly, Goshen, Ind.; and Karl Shelly, letter to Lynette Meck, 24 May 1994, “MMA’s Exemption Strategy,” 5, as found in file titled “HC and Mennos, 1990s,” in the personal files of Karl Shelly, Goshen, Ind. MMA later cooperated with the Washington Office to write a letter encouraging Mennonites to advocate for universal coverage, among other things. See Health Dialogue Steering Committee, “Health Care Reform Call to Action,” May 1994, as found in file titled “HDSC Minutes, 1992-94” in the personal files of Willard S. Krabill, Goshen, Ind. In private conversations with certain legislators—e.g., Rep. Pete Stark (D-Calif.)—MMA made its position on universal coverage clear. See Shelly, “Mennonite Health Association Assembly,” 1; and Steve Bowers, “Meeting Summary: Mennonite Central Committee and Mennonite Mutual Aid; First Mennonite Church, Indianapolis, Ind.,” 22 Mar. 1994, in the personal files of Karl Sommers, Goshen, Ind.
 - 28 Sommers, interview by author, 29 Feb. 2008.
 - 29 Shelly, “MMA’s Exemption Strategy,” 5.
 - 30 Brenneman, letter to Lynette Meck, 6 Jan. 1994.
 - 31 This overwhelming support from constituents was conveyed in an interview with Karl Sommers, 29 Feb. 2008. For raw data on the impressive results of a related MMA letter-writing campaign, see Keith Neuenschwander, “Grass Roots Mailing Response in Support of MMA Brown/Slattery Amendment to Members of the Energy and Commerce Committee,” in the personal files of Karl Sommers, Goshen, Ind.
 - 32 See, e.g., Karl Shelly, “Meeting with Karl Sommers (MMA Vice President); Nancy Chupp; Karl Shelly,” 12 Jan. 1994, as found in file titled “HC and Mennos, 1990s,” in the personal files of Karl Shelly, Goshen, Ind.
 - 33 Bowers, “Meeting Summary.”
 - 34 The first quote is taken from MMA’s mission statement, quoted in Scot D. Yoder, “Evaluation of Health Care Reform Proposals Using Mennonite Mutual Aid’s *Guiding Principles for Responding to the Health Care Crisis*” (Draft), July 1992, 1, as found in file entitled “HC and Mennos, 1990s,” in the personal files of Karl Shelly, Goshen, Ind. As a draft copy, the report was not likely distributed in this exact form. The second quote is taken from Bowers, “Meeting Summary.”
 - 35 Karl Sommers, memo to Howard Brenneman, 8 July 1994, “MMA-MCC Meeting Materials for July 11,” 5, in the personal files of Karl Sommers, Goshen, Ind.
 - 36 Karl Shelly, facsimile to Lynette Meck, 9 Mar. 1994, “MCC U.S. Board & Health Care Reform,” as found in file titled “HC and Mennos, 1990s,” in the personal files of Karl Shelly, Goshen, Ind.
 - 37 Shelly, interview by author, 3 Mar. 2008.
 - 38 Shelly, “MCC U.S. Board & Health Care Reform,” 2.
 - 39 Lynette Meck, “Meeting of MMA and MCC U.S. Board Members; Pittsburgh, Pa.,” 11 July 1994, as found in file titled “HC and Mennos, 1990s,” in the personal files of Karl Shelly, Goshen, Ind.

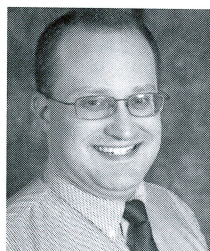
Timely lessons

Jonny Gerig Meyer's and Sarah Bergen's winning submissions in the 2008 John Horsch Mennonite Historical Essay Contest, excerpted in this issue of *Mennonite Historical Bulletin*, are providentially both about mutual aid. It is a deep-rooted Anabaptist tenet and a timely topic. Menno Simons decried Christians who, "although many of them have plenty of everything, ... suffer many of their own afflicted members to ask alms." Nearly four centuries later, J. Winfield Fretz, the staunch American advocate of mutual aid, wrote, "Christian brotherhood and an expression of mutual aid are inseparable."

Is that still true in the 21st century? Do we as an American church still have the type of faith that generated the cooperatives of Mountain Lake, Minn., and financial assistance for returning Civilian Public Service workers? Certainly needs remain. We are not immune to the ongoing issues of healthcare costs and insurance's budgetary bites. Nor are we exempt from the ramifications of the

economy's vagaries. And Mennonite Church USA has an aging membership that will require more services and care.

In that context, Bergen and Meyer are calling us to account. By providing glimpses into the successes and failures of our 20th-century expressions of mutual aid, they are implicitly asking us to consider the possibilities now. Can we find a way to better help our pastors with their healthcare needs as they serve God and church? What are our understandings of community and responsibility as Mennonites become less rural and more diverse? Are there insights to be gleaned from Mennonite Central Committee's and Mennonite Mutual Aid's



political engagements in the 1990s?

There are important, timely lessons to be learned. But that can happen only if we allow history to teach us.

—Rich Preheim



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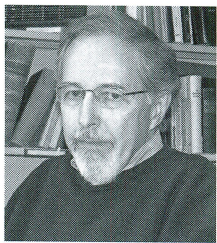
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www.MennoniteUSA.org/history

Stories of three
Mennonite Church USA
area conferences

Building the base



Leonard Gross

Historical Committee honors former leader as executive secretary emeritus

Leonard Gross, who directed denominational historical ministries for 20 years, has been named executive secretary emeritus of the Mennonite Church USA Historical Committee. The committee took that action during its spring meeting April 17-18 in Goshen.

Gross, of Goshen, was executive secretary of the Historical Committee of the former Mennonite Church from 1970 to 1990. During that time he advanced the work of the committee's archives in Goshen and was a tireless advocate "for history as a light to illuminate the happenings of the past and to guide our journey into the future," said Rich Preheim, the current director of the Historical Committee.

Gross also served six years as a consulting archivist before his retirement in 1996. He is the author of three books and many articles. He has also taught at Bethany Christian School, Goshen, Ind.; Goshen (Ind.) College; and Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo.

63-year-old Mennonite periodical discontinues publication

After 63 years of publication, *Mennonite Life* has died. The magazine, published by Bethel College, North Newton, Kan., ceased with its fall 2008 issue.

Mennonite Life called itself a "Mennonite studies" periodical, covering a variety of disciplines including history, arts, current affairs, and fiction. "We have attempted to reach a literate, well-informed audience, but not a narrowly

specialist one," according to a statement from the magazine.

But that audience is no longer viable. "Mennonite publications have split into two segments—those intended for the broadest possible audience, and those consisting of academic specialists writing for other specialists," the statement said. "Readers and writers for a niche in between these don't seem to be a critical mass in the Mennonite world anymore."

Mennonite Life started in 1946. The print version was discontinued in 1999 and became exclusively a web-based periodical. The magazine's website, www.bethelks.edu/mennonitelife, will remain with past issues and index of articles.

Virtual peace archives goes live with 32,000 pages of materials

Goshen (Ind.) College, in collaboration with two other Historic Peace Church schools in Indiana, has launched an online repository of peace-related materials. The Plowshares Digital Archive for Peace Studies, replica.palni.edu/plowshares, was unveiled earlier this year after five years of digitizing paper documents.

The website contains 32,000 pages of materials. Goshen's contribution includes correspondence and questionnaires about Mennonites in military camps during World War I, Civilian Public Service camp newsletters during World War II, and Vietnam War-era diaries and papers. The original documents came from the Mennonite Church USA Historical Committee's Goshen Archives.

Also participating were Quaker-affiliated Earlham College in Richmond, Ind., and Manchester

College, a Church of the Brethren school in North Manchester, Ind. The project was funded by a multi-million-dollar grant from the Lilly Foundation.

"I think this is the first digitization project of this nature and scope—peace-related archival documents pertaining to Brethren, Mennonites, and Quakers," said Goshen College reference and instruction librarian Anne Meyer Byler, who worked on the project.

Canadian politician and Russian Mennonite colony connected

Canada's Liberal Party in May elected Michael Ignatieff, the son of a diplomat, as its new leader. The Ignatieff name has obvious political significance in that country, but it is also relevant to Mennonites with Russian roots, according to *Mennonite Historian*, published by Mennonite Heritage Centre and Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, both in Winnipeg.

In 1888, the Chortitza Colony purchased land for a new colony in the Ukrainian province of Ekaterinoslav. The Mennonites named it Ignatyev, after its previous owner, Count Nicolai Pavlovich Ignatyev. The new colony's administrative offices were located in the curiously named village of New York. Before the sale, it has been a sizable complex on the count's estate. His wife, an American, named it after the renowned city of her native country. The new owners kept the name.

Michael Ignatieff is a great-grandson of the count. His grandfather was the Russian minister of education under Tsar Nicholas II and was one of the few ministers to escape execution during the Communist Revolution.

First five Mennonite overseas mission fields

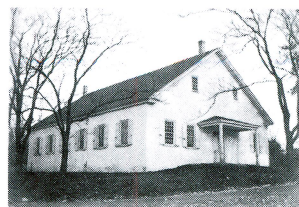
1. Indonesia (1851)
2. India (1899)
3. China (1905)
4. Congo (1911)
5. Argentina (1917)

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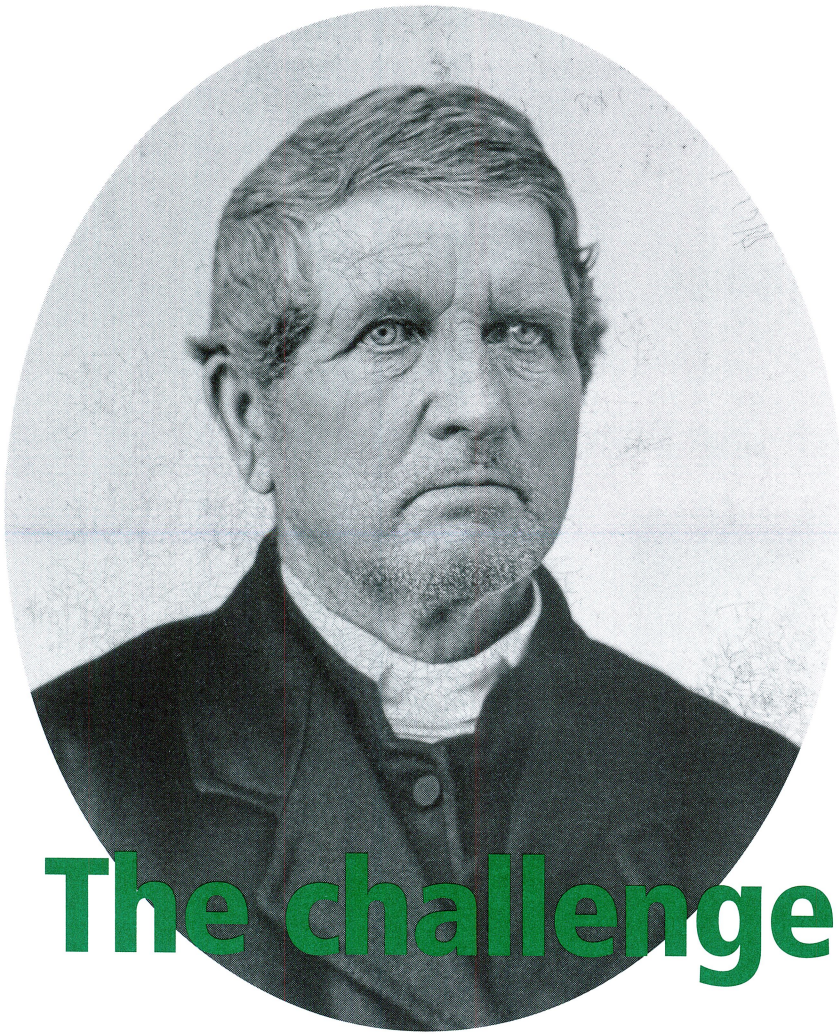
Cover: Workers from the Civilian Public Service unit at Colorado Springs, Colo., lay the foundation for a water tank. The unit was one of three under Mennonite administration in the region that would become Rocky Mountain Conference. Mennonite Church USA Archives-Goshen

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The challenge of change

A fledgling fellowship, formed because of new ideas, struggles with how much innovation is acceptable.

by Maynard Shelly

John H. Oberholtzer, a leader in the formation of the East Pennsylvania Conference, which would become Eastern District Conference.

Mennonite Church USA Archives-
North Newton

Elizabeth Alderfer Hunsicker was feeling good about her church in the spring of 1848. Eight months earlier, her bishop husband, Abraham, had sided with progressive bishop John H. Oberholtzer in a schism with Franconia Conference. That resulted in the formation of the East Pennsylvania Conference of the Mennonite Church and the division of congregations. At the Hunsickers' Skippack Mennonite Church in Montgomery County, those choosing to stay with Franconia built

a new meetinghouse nearby and started calling themselves Upper Skippack, while the Oberholtzer supporters in the old meetinghouse became known as Lower Skippack. The Hunsickers considered themselves as more godly, "taught feelingly and reminded of their duty," Elizabeth said, which was not true in former days. "When I think of how we were instructed, it was mostly about external things like doubled coats," she recalled.

But not all would remain well at

Lower Skippack or in East Pennsylvania Conference. Within the first 11 years of its existence, the conference born out of a split would itself experience several painful divisions. The first one pitted two conference founders against each other, while a second produced a denomination that, barely a century later, would renounce its Anabaptist identity.

On the Sunday before Christmas 1850, Lower Skippack minister Abraham Grater, a nephew of Abraham Hunsicker, spoke in favor of open communion. The thought of people from churches that baptize infants taking part in the Lord's Supper with them riled the faithful. They knew, too, that people baptized as infants often belonged to secret societies, which was also counter to the church's position. A group led by another Lower Skippack minister, Henry Johnson, moved to silence Grater. "As long as any minister maintains that members of a secret society can belong to the church, and maintains also that persons baptized in infancy can commune at the Lord's table," maintained Johnson's group, "so long such minister should not be allowed to preach at our congregation."

Grater protested. He had never spoken about secret societies. The only one who had was his uncle, who said lodge members could join the church. "We as poor preachers must accept the people as they are if we are to make them as they should be," Hunsicker argued. He and Oberholtzer had stood together as influential leaders of the new East Pennsylvania group. Hunsicker had chaired the first conference sessions in 1847 and with his son Henry began Freeland Seminary at Collegeville, the first American Mennonite venture in higher education. Now Hunsicker was at odds with Oberholtzer and other conference leaders. A conference investigation and series of meetings over the following months failed to produce any resolution. In fact, it turned up the heat on the issue of secret societies and church membership, leaving Abraham Hunsicker fearing for the future of his

congregation and his conference. "But if it is to be that I and they shall part asunder through this affair, I don't know how I can bear it," he wrote Oberholtzer. "I hope, though, that it won't be like that."

But it was. When Hunsicker and his supporters continued to protest, the conference issued an ultimatum on May 28, 1851. Ministers who disagree with East Pennsylvania's position on secret societies "are regarded as in error" and "cannot serve in the congregations and [can] have no part in the council until they made their peace with the congregation." Nearly four years earlier, Hunsicker and Oberholtzer had stood together in their efforts to introduce changes to Franconia. Now the two men stood separately, as Hunsicker was expelled from East Pennsylvania. By 1854, the barred bishop and his supporters had organized a "non-sectarian church" that they called the Trinity Christian Society. It joined the Reformed Church in 1888 over objections of the Hunsickers. Freeland Seminary was sold in 1869 and became Ursinus College.

By this time, another new issue was threatening to burn and bruise the young East Pennsylvania Conference: prayer meetings. They had been introduced by the revivalist Evangelical Association (later known as the Evangelical Church), founded by Jacob Albright, a Pennsylvania German reared in the Lutheran church but converted to the spirited words and forms of frontier revivalism. For many years, the Mennonites of Bucks and Montgomery counties escaped

Within the first 11 years of its existence, the conference born out of a split would itself experience several painful divisions.

Lower Skippack Mennonite Church

Mennonite Church USA Archives-North Newton





Rev. H. A. HUNSICKER, Principal

Freeland Seminary

Mennonite Church USA Archives-
North Newton

the full force of this new gospel life form, emphasizing the way of discipleship and faith over the long haul rather than spurts of rapture and frenzy. But that was changing by the 1850s, and Albright's movement found German-speaking friends among eastern Pennsylvania's Mennonites, some of whom were invited to preach at the revival meetings. Among them were William N. Shelly, minister at East Pennsylvania's Swamp Mennonite Church at Quakertown, and Eusebius Hershey from Lancaster County, who in 1890 went to Nigeria without any church support, becoming the first American Mennonite overseas mission worker.

In 1853, William Gehman, minister at Upper Milford Mennonite Church, Zionsville, and others began to meet privately for prayer meetings. "Many that attended the meetings became awakened and deeply convicted of their sinful condition ... found peace in the wounds of Jesus, and were transplanted into the freedom of the children of God," said those who attended. They set aside Sunday afternoons and evenings for their meetings and other devout exercises. Prayer meetings were held once during the week, and family worship was promoted.

East Pennsylvania Conference took an even-handed stand on revival ways in 1853, stating that prayer meetings "may be held at proper times and in proper order by such members or churches who desire them."

Those who approve of prayer meetings "are not to hold it against those who do not feel as they do," and each side will respect the other. But three years later, many conference members wanted to take another look. At a May 2, 1856, meeting, the five East Pennsylvania bishops present overturned the 1853 action regarding the Gehman-led praying meetings "because it has resulted in considerable discontent and evil." The bishops said they saw need for a new ruling "because of incorrect explanations in the congregations of our church." It is right, they said, for members to "gather at proper times for mutual edification and prayer." But these are exceptions, not the rule: "It is not to be regarded as an evangelical command that public appointments be made for prayer meetings, for men shall at all times pray to God in spirit and truth." But the new position was tenuous. By the time of East Pennsylvania's fall meeting, signer Shelly had changed his mind. Formerly of the Swamp congregation and now bishop of a new congregation at Bowmansville in Lancaster County, he withdrew his support as an "open protest" after "riper reflection."

A decade earlier, East Pennsylvania was born out of a movement to embrace new ways of teaching and preaching. Shelly and Gehman wanted to go the next step by following the revivalist tradition of the Evangelical Association with prayer meetings, evangelistic rallies, and an emphasis on stirring personal conversions. This, as Shelly saw it, was the gospel way. At the conference's fall 1857 meeting, he asked for a chance to show that the decision to withdraw church approval of prayer meetings was contrary to the gospel. Gehman arose to say he agreed with Shelly. When the vote was taken, however, only one person sided with the two Williams.

In the wake of the conference's actions, Shelly began to preach revivalism openly, hoping to form an assembly of like-minded congregations with spirited prayers services and long evangelistic meetings. He also spent two weeks visiting Mennonites around Swamp, where he spoke to ten gatherings

and “saw souls who recently, and not so recently, have come to faith in the Lord Jesus and they find their refuge fully in us.”

On October 12, 1857, Shelly wrote to Daniel Hoch in Ontario for help. Hoch was another evangelical-minded Mennonite minister who had already separated from the main church body and formed his own conference. Shelly asked Hoch for a copy of his constitution. “As soon as I have your rules,” he said, “I’m going to call a meeting in my homeland of our praying brothers and sisters to test it so we can walk with you in unity and peace, and in one heart and soul.” He felt sure he had the support of a band of believers ready to join Hoch’s group.

Shelly’s letter also delivered some hard news: the splitting of East Pennsylvania Conference has begun. “I and Brother William Gehman and Brother David Henning as preachers and Brother Jacob Gottshall [both from Mount Bethel Mennonite Church at Bangor] as deacon have just now separated from them for no other reason than that we could no longer endure their pharisaic position regarding prayer meetings.” But there was another reason: Shelly told Hoch that he knows of several dissatisfied souls who told him they were “baptized by Oberholtzer in unbelief” and not content with their entry into the church. “[We] also believe that most must first be converted before they can be received into the congregation,” Shelly wrote.

When a committee chosen in the fall of 1857 to look into a dispute between Shelly and the Bowmansville church reported back to the conference the following spring, it said nothing about the congregation in Lancaster County. Instead it accused Shelly of being “contrary-minded” and refusing to “accept the former decision” on prayer meetings. The conference meeting on May 5, 1858, subsequently voted to “strike his name from the list of ministers of our church.” Having made an example of Shelly, the conference went on to warn other “ministers and deacons” who “have absented themselves in contempt of the council.” They would be treated in the same way

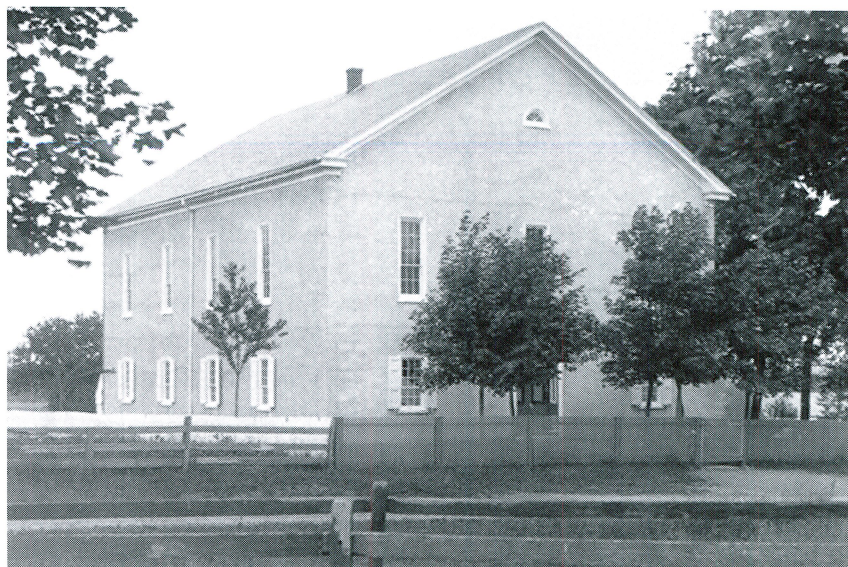
unless “by letter or in person, they give to the next meeting of the council the reason for their absence.”

But two weeks before the meeting, scheduled for Oct. 7, 1858, Shelly, Gehman, and five other supporters of the revival movement in the Mennonite family of churches took action on their own. On Sept. 24, in the house of David Musselman in Zionsville, they affirmed with Shelly as he had argued at the conference meeting just the year before: “The decision of the bishops is unevangelical.” They called themselves the Evangelical Mennonite Society, to be known later as the Mennonite Brethren in Christ. The group in 1959, having long shed Anabaptism, changed its name to the Bible Fellowship Church.

East Pennsylvania Conference, meanwhile, aligned itself with the new General Conference Mennonite Church, organized in 1860, and became the denomination’s Eastern District Conference.

Maynard Shelly was a longtime administrator, editor and writer for the General Conference Mennonite Church. He lives in North Newton, Kan.

East Pennsylvania Conference took an even-handed stand on revival ways in 1853, but three years later, many conference members wanted to take another look.



West Swamp Mennonite Church Mennonite Church USA Archives-North Newton



Independent beginnings lead to interdependent relations in an isolated area

by Martin Lehman

Charlie Byer had both a respiratory problem and a desire to reach his neighbors with the Gospel of Christ. As a bachelor in 1906, he began a Sunday school in Columbia, Pa., a ministry he continued with his bride, Anna, until 1919. That's when the Byer family moved to Knoxville, Tenn., where they engaged in similar work under Virginia Conference. Charlie was also hoping the mountain air would provide respiratory relief. But he hadn't counted on coal dust and factory pollution, so in the fall of 1925 Charlie, Anna, and their three children moved farther south.

The Byers spent that winter at Arcadia, Fla., before returning to Pennsylvania for the summer of 1926. Charlie went back to Florida in August, leaving Anna and their children behind to care for her aging stepmother during the winter months. This time Charlie located in Tampa and immediately began witnessing, with the goal of establishing a Mennonite congregation. For encouragement and support, he turned to John H. Mellinger. He was the chair of Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities, the Lancaster Conference

ministry that assumed responsibility for Byer's Columbia Sunday school in 1919. In early 1927, Mellinger made an extended trip through the South, surveying mission possibilities and visiting Mennonites in Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Florida.

About the same time, an unnamed sister made a contribution of \$5 to Eastern Board (as it was commonly called) for the purchase of a tent for work at Tampa. It was used for revival meetings starting in February 1927, and on March 18 the first Tampa members were received and the first Mennonite communion held. In August Eastern Board purchased land and provided materials and labor to build a small meetinghouse, which was dedicated on Jan. 27, 1929. It was the first permanent Mennonite congregation in Florida. The next year Lancaster delegated the care of the new congregation to Noah Mack, a genial and conservative bishop and pioneer revivalist in the conference.

But the Tampa Mennonites were not the first adherents of the faith in the city. In the fall of 1925, a Canton, Ohio, contractor approached Amishman Dan Kurtz of nearby Greentown about doing construction work

Youth from Oak Terrace Mennonite Church in Blountstown, Fla., distributing literature. The congregation was a member of Indiana-Michigan Conference, one of four Mennonite Church area conferences represented in the state before the creation of Southeast Conference in 1973.

Mennonite Church USA Archives-Goshen

in Tampa during the winter. So Kurtz and his family and neighbor and fellow church member Mart Yoder and his family moved to Florida. They were soon followed by others, as Tampa welcomed construction workers. The city was thriving, with houses, hotels, apartments, a civic auditorium, and a hospital being built. By January 1926, 44 people of Amish origin were living and working in Tampa. But the boom turned to bust in 1926, and the Amish colony scattered as workers lost their lucrative employment.

Some of the Tampa Amish, including the Kurtzes and Yoders, relocated to Venice, Fla., to farm but were disappointed with what they found. In Sarasota County, however, a recently drained lake resulted in rich muck soil that was ideal for raising vegetables. Dan and Amanda Kurtz and their children found a new winter home at Fruitville, just east of Sarasota, and were soon joined by Roman and Mary Miller. Amanda and Mary were sisters and daughters of Moses Coblentz, an Indiana Amish minister. The families provided Coblentz with train fare in the winters of 1927-28 and 1928-29 to hold Sunday morning church meetings in the homes of his daughters. That helped counter any perceptions that the Florida Amish were wintering in the South as an escape from the church's restrictions.

The first Mennonite family to make the Sarasota area a year-round home was Myron and Elsie Yoder from Goshen, Ind., who arrived in December 1935. They soon requested and received permission from county officials to use the Fruitville public school building for worship during the winter. Both Amish and Mennonite ministers preached at the services in the Fruitville school.

Relations between the Amish and the Mennonites in Sarasota were such that they collaborated in social and religious activities. The Amish maintained their traditional garb and tolerated the more relaxed practices of the less conservative Mennonites. J. Paul Sauder, pastor of the Tampa mission, was called to Sarasota several times to help the Amish-Mennonite community organize a

union Sunday school. One visitor from the North described this unusual fellowship this way: "So long as no conference organized a congregation, members of all groups worshiped together, sang each other's hymns, and heard each other's ministers preach. Bearded Amishmen, their wives and daughters wearing the prescribed cape, black hose, full pleated skirt, and devotion headdress, worshiped with the more conventionally dressed Mennonites, and both groups were equally at home with the Conservative Amish Mennonites who formed a sort of cultural link between the two."

A new Fruitville school was built about 1940, and Amish and Mennonite worshipers decided to purchase the old building. But owning property required a more formal organization. On Feb. 23, 1941, three trustees were chosen to represent the various groups in the congregation. The incorporating group named itself the Mennonite, Conservative Amish Mennonite, and Amish Church of Sarasota, Fla., and agreed that their meetinghouse would be open to any Amish or Mennonite group without discrimination. The trustees purchased the school building for \$450 on May 26, 1941, and the building was dedicated Feb. 1, 1942.

Amish bishop Enos D. Yoder, a seasonal tourist from Kalona, Iowa, strongly supported the union church, but opened his home in Pinecraft to the Amish community

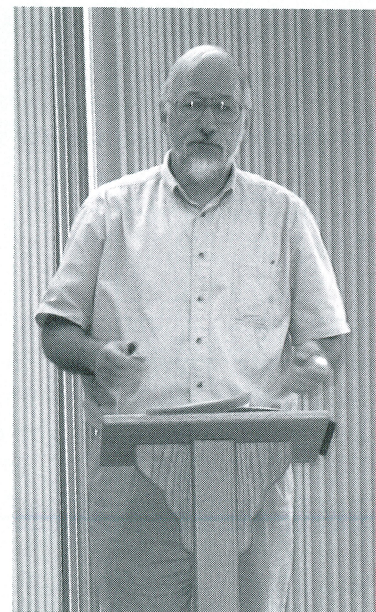
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Started in 1945, Bay Shore Mennonite Church was the first conference-affiliated congregation in Sarasota, Fla. It was a member of Ohio Conference until it became part of the new Southeast Conference in 1973.

Mennonite Church USA Archives-Goshen



2008-09 Mennonite Church USA Historical Committee annual report



The current global economic recession has generated much historical reflection, as comparisons have been repeatedly made with the Great Depression of the 1930s and other times of financial crisis. Such examinations certainly reinforce the importance of the study of history. Meanwhile, the business of history has been affected like virtually everything else in these hard times.

The Mennonite Church USA Historical Committee finished the 2008-09 fiscal year (which concluded Jan. 31) with expenses exceeding income by \$31,000, even though expenses were nearly \$6,000 below budget. Contributions were \$15,000 below expectations. Fortunately, we were able to make up the deficit with reserve funds, but doing so applies serious fiscal pressure for the current year and beyond.

In response to this situation, the Historical Committee has trimmed its 2009-10 budget by nine percent. No staff positions have been eliminated, but one full-time position was reduced to 80 percent and a 60-percent position to half-time. Another significant adjustment was cutting the number of issues of *Mennonite Historical Bulletin* from the customary four to three for this year.

But while the past year presented unquestionable challenges, it also provided nice rewards. The Historical Committee

received a \$3,500 grant from the Kansas Humanities Council to process the remaining General Conference Mennonite Church collections in our North Newton, Kan., archives. The money will be used to hire a person to catalog the materials. We are accepting contributions to purchase additional archival-quality boxes and folders for storing the collections.

In November, the Historical Committee partnered with a regional organization, Michiana Anabaptist Historians, to sponsor a one-day workshop for congregational historians, held in Goshen, Ind. Participants came from Beachy Amish and Conservative Mennonite Conference as well as Mennonite Church USA congregations.

The Goshen and North Newton archives continue to make significant progress in our digitization program. In the last year we have posted some 10,000 images to the Historical Committee's website (www.mcusa-archives.org). Those scanned documents and photographs are now accessible to anyone with an Internet connection.

The Historical Committee welcomed two new members in 2008. Lawrence Hart of Clinton, Okla., is pastor of Koinonia Mennonite Church and founder and director of the Cheyenne Cultural Center. Rod Janzen is a history professor at Fresno (Calif.) Pacific University.

(Pictured) Dennis Stoesz, archivist at the Mennonite Church USA Historical Committee's Goshen (Ind.) Archives, addresses a November 2008 workshop for congregational historians.

Photo by Theron Schlabach

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One from four *continued...*

for German preaching and singing. The Pinecraft community, between Fruitville and Sarasota, had originally been known as the Sarasota National Tourist Camp. It was laid out by the county to accommodate tents, trailers, and cabins. Lots sold for \$35 each. More Amish and Mennonites began to make Pinecraft their Florida home away from home, and it would become the center of the area's conservative Anabaptist community.

For two decades the tourist church served the Amish and Mennonite community in Sarasota, but now it was about to splinter into more congregations. The union church leaders who were in Sarasota only for the winter months did not understand the needs of the year-round residents, who wanted a church with doors open more than just in the winter, a church that had the authority to baptize and marry their children. In the spring of 1939, Amanda Kurtz, daughter of local Amish pioneers Dan and Amanda Kurtz, became engaged to Ernie Yoder, one of the Mennonite young men who had come to Sarasota. Neither of them had been baptized. With no organized congregation to join and no tourist minister present to baptize or marry them, Kurtz and Yoder had to turn to Sauder in Tampa, the only

Mennonite minister who lived year-round in the state. The solution to such situations was a congregation with a conference connection.

In 1944, five families with roots in the Buckeye State petitioned Ohio Conference to organize a year-round congregation in Sarasota. Also joining the petition were Myron and Elsie Yoder from Indiana. All but the Yoders were recently new arrivals and did not have strong connections to the conservative fellowship centered in Pinecraft. Ohio Conference organized the new congregation the next spring and began searching for a location for a meetinghouse. Several Mennonites who owned lots in northwestern Sarasota, upon hearing of the plans for an "evergreen church," donated land. Located near Sarasota Bay and Bay Shore Drive, the congregation was christened Bay Shore Mennonite Church. The first service was held in October 1945.

It had been hoped that the formation of a second Sarasota group would not generate ill will, but that was not the case. The men of the new church did not wear plain suits, and they did wear neckties. The women wore prayer coverings for public worship but not at home. This departure from conservative practice as well as the physical departure caused much displeasure for Otho B. Shenk, spiritual leader of the Pinecraft church. From

Florida's first Evangelist's 1895 visit linked scattere



John S. Coffman

Mennonite Church USA Archives-Goshen

A few Mennonites had found their ways to Florida by 1892. Lewis H. and Mary Shank's family from Morgan County, Mo., was one of them. They had moved to Bowling Green in Hardee County for the sake of Mary's health. She died in 1894 of consumption, leaving her husband with eight children in a community where there was no local Mennonite church support.

For encouragement, Shank turned to the well-known evangelist John S. Coffman

of Elkhart, Ind. From January 1892 through September 1895, Shank wrote 19 letters to Coffman, trying to persuade him to come to Florida on an evangelistic tour. He believed that Coffman could provide what was lacking for his children in Florida—the influences of a Mennonite community. Shank also hoped that Coffman's coming would bring other Mennonites from the North to Bowling Green. Furthermore, he believed that his neighbors would learn from Coffman the truth as Mennonites knew it.

the pulpit, he admonished the people not to follow “the necktie crowd.”

Although the progressives had left, the conservative union group didn't lack for numbers. But it did lack for facilities. The Fruitville building was damaged in a 1944 hurricane, and the congregation moved its services to a nearby camp. In 1946, the group bought a former bakery in Pinecraft as its new meetinghouse, with room to seat an estimated 700 people. On Jan. 12, 1947, the church drew 609 worshippers, while Bay Shore had 360.

But another Pinecraft split was developing as some people wanted a congregation that was not as conservative but not as progressive as Bay Shore. Some Mennonites thought Virginia Conference might provide a more conservative home for year-round residents. In March 1947, two bishops from Virginia, Joseph Driver of Waynesboro and Truman Brunk of Denbigh, came to Sarasota. They helped make plans for a more satisfactory church experience for those staying for the coming summer. A Lancaster Conference minister, Frank Stoltzfus of Coatesville, Pa., would stay to preach to the group. A communion service was also planned for those who would not go back north in time for communion in their home congregations.



At first the Virginia bishops advised against another permanent congregation in Sarasota. They later changed their minds on condition that any new meetinghouse be located at least three miles from the union church meeting in the heart of Pinecraft. The conference was arranging to send a minister to oversee the congregation when it again reversed course, concluding that organizing a third Florida group was probably premature.

As Virginia vacillated, Henry Brunk of Harrisonburg came to the rescue. He owned two large tracts of land southwest of the intersection of Tuttle Avenue and

In addition to becoming a popular wintertime destination for Northern Mennonites and Amish, Florida was home to a Civilian Public Service unit at Mulberry, which worked at hookworm eradication.

Mennonite Church USA Archives-Goshen

d settlers, although only temporarily

Shank's hope, prayers, and pleas were rewarded. On Monday, Jan. 21, 1895, Coffman left Elkhart for a long contemplated trip by train to the South. From Jan. 23 to Feb. 16, 1895, Coffman visited five Mennonite families living in five different places in Florida, unknown to each other prior to his tour.

Coffman first arrived at Macclenny in Baker County, about 25 miles west of Jacksonville, where he was met by I. G. Plank. That evening, Coffman preached in a Methodist Episcopal church, then spent the next day and evening

with the Plank family, baptizing their son and daughter.

Next, Coffman traveled south to Fairbanks in Alachua County, about seven miles north of Gainesville, for a 24-hour visit with A. Hunzicker, a native of Pennsylvania whom Coffman described as “spending his old age in apparent contentment.” On Jan. 26, he traveled about 20 miles to Hawthorne to visit the John Yoder family. Coffman was met by the “aged brother” who took him to his hospitable and well-furnished home. On Sunday morning and

Bahia Vista Street, about half a mile west of Pinecraft. He was developing a mobile trailer park on one tract and had the second tract surveyed into lots and offered for sale. Within ten days, Brunk sold 45 lots and provided \$7,500 to start a building fund for a new church. Nine choice lots were reserved for the building site. Other people donated much labor and cash.

Without the approval of a conference, work on the new Mennonite meeting place began in the fall of 1950 and was completed in December. Brunk told Virginia that it could have the new building; if it did not want it, he would offer it to someone else. It was an offer the conference could not refuse. The new brick structure of Tuttle Avenue Mennonite Church had a seating capacity of 400 and was the first Mennonite church to have an air conditioner, according to the boast on the cover of its weekly bulletin.

Tuttle Avenue's bulletins also revealed respect and cooperation with other Florida Mennonites. The congregation canceled its regular evening services to encourage members to support revival meetings at Bay Shore Mennonite Church. Regular prayer and Bible study meetings were cancelled to allow members to attend revival meetings at Pinecraft. Tuttle Avenue cosponsored a Christian Life Conference with Bay Shore.

Virginia Conference organized a Florida District in 1963, including Tuttle Avenue (renamed Bahia Vista Mennonite Church in 1980) and two outposts, Newtown Gospel Chapel and St. Petersburg's First Mennonite Church. These congregations now had more responsibility for each other and no longer were subject to bishop oversight from Virginia. The pastors of the congregations chose a coordinator from among their number to provide district leadership. Lancaster also created a local district, as its Tampa mission led to two more congregations in the city.

In addition to Virginia, Ohio, and Lancaster, two other area conferences were represented in the Southeast region in the 1950s. Conflict within the Pinecraft congregation prompted a group to withdraw in 1953 and form Palm Grove Conservative Mennonite Church, affiliated with the Conservative Conference. Meanwhile, a group from Kouts, Ind., had moved to Florida's Panhandle and helped form Oak Terrace Mennonite Church at Blountstown, which came under Indiana-Michigan Conference oversight by 1957.

But these distinct groups would eventually begin connecting in a formal way. On Aug. 9-10, 1968, ministers from the across the region plus one lay person

evening, he had meetings in the Presbyterian church in Hawthorne. On Jan. 28, Coffman traveled about 100 miles from Zellwood, where he met John Harshberger, Coffman's relative from Augusta County, Virginia. That evening Coffman had a meeting at the nearby schoolhouse nearby.

Finally on Jan. 30, Coffman arrived at Bowling Green and the home of Lewis Shank, where they had a well attended meeting the same evening. Coffman's evangelistic meetings ran through Feb. 10 in the Mount Pisgah Baptist meeting house near the Shank home. They concluded with three additional appointments in the Methodist meetinghouse in Bowling Green. While in town, Coffman also baptized Shank

children John and Mollie.

On Feb. 15, Coffman went to Dover in Hillsborough County, a few miles east of Tampa, to visit A. R. Housekeeper, a former Pennsylvanian, before boarding a steamship the next day to go to Mobile, Ala., and New Orleans for more ministry.

As he left, the evangelist was strongly attracted to Florida: Bathing without the least inconvenience on account of the cold; walking outside without coat or vest; seeing children outdoors barefoot and bareheaded; seeing the deciduous trees budding and the woods spangled with wild flowers; following the meanderings of the butterfly by day and the firefly by night; hearing the song of the robin the

per congregation met in what became the first meeting of the Southeast Mennonite Convention. According to a resolution adopted at the gathering, participants agreed to “commit ourselves to the promotion of Christian unity and brotherhood in our relationships as congregations and conferences.” At the same time, they “assure our constituency that it is not our purpose to disrupt relationships now existing with conferences or to disturb the special relationships enjoyed by congregations without and within our geographical boundaries.” The second annual convention met April 11-12, 1969, attended by delegates from 19 congregations affiliated with five conferences: Lancaster, Ohio, Indiana-Michigan, Virginia and Conservative. Convention members four years later voted to become Southeast Conference of the Mennonite Church, with all but the Conservative Conference congregations shifting their affiliations from their previous conferences to the new one.

Martin Lehman of Goshen, Ind., is a former minister and bishop in Florida and the author of Roots and Branches: A Narrative History of the Amish and Mennonites in the Southeastern United States, 1892-1992, to be published next year by Cascadia Publishing House.

trill of the mockingbird – all in the month of January.

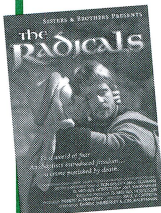
Coffman reported to readers of the *Herald of Truth*, of which he was assistant editor, that Plank would be delighted to have some of “our people” locate there so he could exercise church privileges with them. Yoder and Shank would be equally delighted to have a number of Mennonites find homes in their vicinities. Coffman’s visit to Florida also stirred the state’s several scattered Mennonite families to correspond among themselves.

But no Mennonite community developed, as the Floridians soon moved out of state or died.

—Martin Lehman

Resources from Mennonite Church USA Historical Committee

to help us preserve our heritage, interpret our faith stories and proclaim God’s work among us



The Radicals DVD – The major motion picture about Margaretha and Michael Sattler and Anabaptism’s birth in 16th-century Europe. Includes commentary by Myron Augsburger, interviews with film’s producers and other extras. Also available in Spanish. \$29.99 plus shipping and handling.

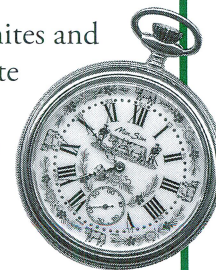
Menno Simons commemorative fraktur – A teaching tool as well as artwork, this four-color fraktur (a traditional German calligraphic art form) was created by noted artist Roma J. Ruth, featuring text from Menno’s own words on Jesus as the Prince of Peace. \$25 plus \$3 for shipping and handling. Also available as note cards. \$3.50 for four, \$6.50 for eight.



Sourcebook: Oral History Interviews with World War I Conscientious Objectors – First-person stories from more than 50 Mennonites who chose faithfulness—and risked persecution—rather than take up arms and violate their nonviolent beliefs. \$5.

J.C.: A Life Sketch by J.C. Wenger – Longtime church leader J.C. Wenger records his reflections and experiences, from growing up in eastern Pennsylvania to becoming a respected professor, speaker and Bible translator. Signed by the author. \$25.

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Edward: Pilgrimage of a Mind, edited by Ida Yoder – The journal of scholar and churchman Edward Yoder between 1931 and 1945, it offers amazing insight into a critical era of Mennonite life and faith. \$25

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Rocky Mountain's growing edge

The emergence of a new conference with a congregational emphasis

by Harlan D. Unrau

Students at the Mennonite nursing school at La Junta, Colo. The region's many health ministries, such as hospitals and nursing homes, helped bring together Colorado Mennonites and spur the development of Rocky Mountain Conference.

Mennonite Church USA Archives-Goshen

By the mid-1940s, the Kansas-Missouri Conference of the Mennonite Church had grown to 42 congregations with more than 3,000 members. Congregations were located in eight states stretching from Denver, Colo., in the west to Gulfport, Miss., in the east and from Hannibal, Mo., in the north to Perryton, Texas, in the south. To more adequately recognize its geographic representation, the conference changed its name to South Central in 1946. That same year, a meeting at La Junta (Colo.) Mennonite Church discussed forming a separate conference in the Rocky Mountain area but determined the congregations in the area were not strong enough to justify such a move.

Yet a western conference identity had been emerging for nearly half a century. Starting in the early 1900s, the Colorado

congregations were generally considered to be their own Kansas-Missouri district with their own bishop. Jacob A. Heatwole, who moved with his family from Virginia to near La Junta in 1907, was ordained bishop 12 years later and served some of the Colorado congregations as well as the scattered membership in western Oklahoma, northern Texas and New Mexico. When his health began to fail, Allen H. Erb, administrator and chaplain of the Mennonite Hospital at La Junta and member of the pastoral team at La Junta Mennonite Church, was ordained as bishop in 1939 to assist Heatwole. Erb assumed all responsibilities the next year and served as Colorado bishop until he moved to Oregon in 1952.

Further impetus for a separate Rocky Mountain conference was provided by the

region's Sunday school conventions and Christian Workers' Conferences, beginning in 1905. The conventions, initially sponsored by the La Junta congregation and East Holbrook Mennonite Church at Cheraw, became biannual meetings of all Colorado congregations on how to conduct Sunday school programs more effectively. By the late 1920s, the conventions were replaced by Christian Workers' Conferences held each fall. They not only promoted more effective Christian education programs in existing churches but also led to new Sunday schools, vacation Bible schools and other outreach efforts throughout the region. Relationships were further fostered by initiatives such as hospitals and nursing homes at Aspen, Glenwood Springs, Walsenburg, La Jara, Rocky Ford and La Junta and by the Frontier Boys' Village and Rocky Mountain Mennonite Camp programs, both at Divide.

There were other factors also contributing to a Rocky Mountain identity. Most South Central meetings took place in the Newton-Hesston area in Kansas, requiring considerable costly and tiresome travel for Mennonites in Colorado. Moreover, the Colorado congregations were much more involved in hospital and health issues than the conference's Kansas and Missouri members. Over the years Colorado Mennonites had also developed more sympathetic views toward divorce, use of the head covering, and other church practices.

South Central revised its polity in 1954, dividing itself into six districts, each of which elected its own overseer. (Further ordination of bishops was suspended, making the conference the first in the Mennonite Church to move away from the traditional form of leadership.) The ministers of each region were to meet on a semi-annual basis for spiritual inspiration and fellowship. The Rocky Mountain District included eight congregations in Colorado with 641 members and an unorganized group

near Scott City in western Kansas. E.M. Yost, pastor of First Mennonite Church in Denver, was chosen overseer in the fall of 1955. A financial program was adopted to ensure that he could be available for the overseer ministry on a full-time basis. A former minister and evangelist in the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite ("Holdeman" church), Yost would provide the vision and leadership for the efforts that ultimately resulted in the establishment of a separate Rocky Mountain Conference in 1961.

Yost understood the need for a more formal and distinct organization for the congregations of the area to strengthen their fellowship, mission and outreach. Under his leadership, the Colorado district ministers' meetings, which sometimes included congregational delegates, were convened three or four times a year to discuss common problems, study new methods of service and plan means of coordinating their objectives and groups. These meetings gradually resulted in growing bonds of kinship and mutual acquaintance and thus stimulated interest in the formation of a new conference. On July 4, 1958, at Rocky Mountain Mennonite Camp near Divide, Colo., a somewhat informal Rocky Mountain Area Fellowship was established with a constitution "to promote and strengthen Christian fellowship and stimulate evangelism and Christian service among the Mennonite congregations in this area." The desire for a new conference was made public at the fall ministers' meeting in Glenwood Springs in 1958, at which time it was placed on the agenda for the January 1959 ministers' meeting to be held in La Junta.

Those in attendance at La Junta discussed the possibilities of initiating a conference to "serve our own area" and called a meeting on July 3, 1959, for the region's ministers and congregational delegates to discuss formation of a Colorado conference. Prior to this meeting, Yost

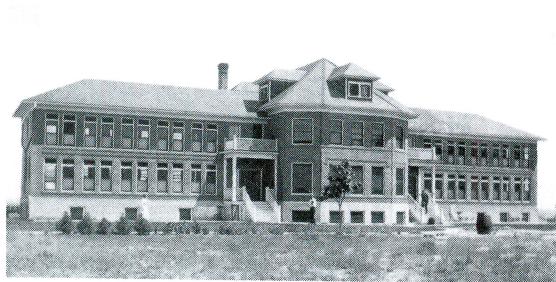
Individualism's triumph

As Mennonites moved farther west in the early 20th century, the Western District Conference of the General Conference Mennonite Church attempted to guide and regulate the emerging migration movement. In 1910, the conference formed a Colonization Committee. Its first goal was to prepare a list of suitable settlements and warn against certain communities where the small number of settlers and harsh economic climate made it impossible to establish a German school or Mennonite congregation.

Members of the committee made six land inspection tours, visiting Kansas, Oklahoma, the Gulf Coast, Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico. They decided to recommend a site near Carlsbad, N.M., where the Carlsbad Irrigation Project was providing for extensive agricultural development in Pecos River Valley. In 1912 the committee presented a comprehensive plan to prevent dispersion of Mennonites, including arrangements for land purchases and collection of funds for a church building in each settlement.

By 1918, however, the Colonization Committee reported a total failure in its efforts, stating that personal independence and individual autonomy had transcended concerns for solidarity.

— Harlan D. Unrau



The Mennonite Sanitarium at La Junta, built in 1908. It led to the formation of the La Junta Mennonite School of Nursing six years later.

Mennonite Church USA Archives-Goshen

personally presented the issue to each congregation.

Although a high degree of interest was indicated in these preliminary meetings, “variance

of opinion” was voiced at the July discussion, and a decision was deferred pending further study. Meanwhile, in a July 18 letter to Yost, Mennonite Church moderator J.C. Wenger lent his support to the efforts for establishing a new “Colorado Mennonite Conference,” stating, “I fully favor this move. So does our Executive Secretary, Brother Paul Erb.” Wenger voiced his hopes that the leaders of South Central Conference would also support the effort.

The Colorado ministers appointed a committee to grapple with questions such as church membership, the relationship of Mennonite churches and institutions, Christian freedom, and Christian interrelationships with the larger society. The ministers discussed the committee’s report during their Oct. 6-8, 1959, meetings at East Holbrook. The ministers present generally agreed that the concept of church membership meant that an individual entered a congregation as a learner with the congregation serving as redemptive agent in facilitating the individual’s spiritual growth. There was always a growing edge for the

individual and the congregation. Furthermore, a congregation might maintain minimum standards for reception of members while simultaneously holding before the individual, as well as the congregation at large, the ideal of full Christian maturity. Aids to spiritual growth for individuals within the context of congregational life included such practices as believer’s baptism, stewardship, witnessing, peace and love, acceptance of responsibility, separation from the world, sanctity of home and marriage, divine headship, symbolism, worship, and fellowship. Considerable discussion was given to topics relating to outreach, such as connecting with the surrounding culture in spite of Mennonite stereotypes and the evangelistic merits of traditional public meetings compared with person-to-person contact.

During the October meetings, the Colorado congregations indicated generally favorable responses toward formation of a Rocky Mountain Conference, but some questions and dissension remained. Further study was required for key issues, such as faith and practice, organizations, a constitution, finances, and relationships with the Mennonite Church and South Central Conference. A study conference was convened at First Mennonite Church of Colorado Springs on Jan. 15-16, 1960, with Menno M. Troyer, South Central secretary, in attendance. Several papers were presented and discussed.

In his paper, Paul H. Martin, pastor of First Mennonite Church in La Junta, emphasized the centrality of congregations and defined an area conference as “a service agency which conducts inter-congregational activity or which is the expression of inter-congregational relationship. It is hoped that a fellowship on the inter-congregational level can remain humble enough to be regularly the servant of the members and congregations.”

Yost cited Harold S. Bender’s observation that during the 19th and early 20th centuries, Mennonite area conferences had developed into authoritarian, autocratic ecclesiastical bodies with power over local congregations and ministers. To counteract

Psychiatric hospital workers from Denver’s Civilian Public Service unit.

Mennonite Church USA Archives-Goshen



these historic tendencies, Yost presented four primary objectives that should govern the area conferences:

1. To broaden the fellowship of the individual congregations who are members of the conference
2. To promote oneness in Gospel principles
3. To coordinate the witness and extension of the member churches
4. To establish lines of communication with its people to keep them adequately informed and in touch with the total program and activities of the larger fellowship of which they are a part

In his paper, Luke Birky, administrator of the Mennonite Hospital in La Junta, reported the results of a survey of churches in the Rocky Mountain region. Most favored greater participation by the total membership in conference affairs, with laypeople were asking for more voice in the work of the church. Birky concluded with his personal observation that South Central Conference was much too large geographically to effectively meet the needs and accomplish the objectives of the region's congregations.

Two days after the meeting, bishop Allen H. Erb, who had been in attendance, sent a letter to Yost, complimenting the Colorado congregations for their careful planning and study. Erb regarded the formation of a conference as a "pioneering venture" and observed that from the "organizational standpoint" there should be a Colorado area conference. He wrote, "As far as I know, no conference was ever organized with as much back-ground preparation and study as is being given to this conference."

On July 2-3, 1960, a historic meeting was convened at First Mennonite Church of Colorado Springs. In addition to the area's ministers and congregational delegates, representatives of the South Central Conference's executive committee, Goshen College dean Harold S. Bender and bishop Erb attended the meeting by invitation. On behalf of South Central, conference secretary Menno Troyer, who had become chaplain of the La Junta Mennonite Hospital in 1959, expressed regret at the possible loss of the

Colorado area and cautioned against moving too hastily. However, he said, if there was clear direction and affirmation, South Central would give its blessing to the formation of the new conference. After further discussion, those assembled unanimously approved a resolution to form Rocky Mountain Conference. The resolution, which needed to be approved by all congregations in the area, also included stipulations that the conference adopt South Central's Statement of Faith and Practice; that the formation of the conference receive South Central's sanction and approval; that a close working relationship with South Central be maintained during the transition; and that Rocky Mountain become a member of the Mennonite Church.

In August 1960, Yost and Samuel Janzen, pastor of Glenwood Springs (Colo.) Mennonite Church, presented the resolution to the annual meeting of South Central Conference. Then Yost visited each Rocky Mountain congregation. Each one eventually voted for the plan, although East Holbrook, because of its lengthy involvement with South Central, took two congregational votes before granting its approval. Once that happened, the conference made application to the Mennonite Church, and on Aug. 25, 1961, at the denominational general conference at Johnstown, Pa., Rocky Mountain Conference was unanimously accepted as an area conference.

Rocky Mountain came to a formal end 44 years later. In 2005, the conference and the local congregations of Western District Conference joined to form Mountain States Conference. It was the fourth merger of former Mennonite Church and General Conference Mennonite Church area conferences, and the first one since the 2002 denominational merger that created Mennonite Church USA.

Harlan D. Unrau of Lakewood, Colo., is conference historian for Mountain States Conference. This article is excerpted from his book In Pursuit of Land, Health and Mission: A History of Mennonites in the Mountain States Region, published in 2007.



Allen H. Erb

Mennonite Church USA Archives-Goshen

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Conference importance and periodical frequency

There is no doubt about the primacy of Mennonite Church USA area conferences. It's right there in the denomination's bylaws: "The area conference is the basic membership unit of Mennonite Church USA, and through which the member congregations of the area conference also are members of Mennonite Church USA."

Furthermore, the bylaws continue, "The area conference is an affiliation of congregations that join together in common life and mission. In coming together, congregations recognize their interdependence and their need for mutual exhortation and admonition, and their strength to fulfill the church's mission in the world."

In other words, area conferences are not optional in our little household in the broader Mennonite faith family. Our polity certainly requires them. But so do our understandings of discernment, accountability, and mission. With its focus on area conferences, this issue of *Mennonite Historical Bulletin* underscores that emphasis.

Doing so also sheds light on the diversity inherent in Mennonite Church USA. It is incredibly enriching—and often misunderstood. As Maynard Shelly's exploration of East

Pennsylvania Conference (now Eastern District) illustrates, the rebels who left Franconia Conference and subsequently helped found the General Conference Mennonite Church were not anything-goes liberals, as convention sometimes holds. And Harlan Unrau notes in his article that those who created Rocky Mountain Conference (now part of Mountain States) did not necessarily adhere to the rigid authoritarianism that stereotypically defines the former Mennonite Church.

This issue also includes the annual report of the Mennonite Church USA Historical Committee, *MHB's* publishers. We are deeply grateful to everyone who has supported us during the past year. Unfortunately, we, like almost everyone else, have felt the effects of the economic downturn. As a result, we have cut



our number of *MHB* issues this year from four to three. I hope you find the expanded content of this summer issue compensates for the reduction in frequency.

—Rich Preheim